

produce his own seed. Of course, he must go into debt and must pay high interest. From the village neither horse nor boat can reach his backwoods cottage, which lies beyond even the poorest of roads. He must carry the seed on his back across swamps and through wilderness. At last the patch of field is sowed. It will take most of the year before the rye will be ready for reaping. He must agonize through the fall, winter, and spring, tormented by fears—heavy snow may crush the rye, crusted snow may smother it, hail may shatter it, heavy rains may beat down the heading rye, and, finally, a late frost may kill it. And each of these does take its toll of the poor man's field, of the barren ground, which by itself has no power and to which he has not been able to give power. The meager crop is tied into sheaves, placed in stacks. But a threshing barn must be built for the rye, wood must be chopped so the barn can be heated to dry out the rye, and then the rye must be threshed. He has no watermill nor windmill, the grain must be ground by hand in a corner of the one room of his cottage.

At last he is able to make a dough, but then he realizes that if he wishes to survive through the long winter, the loaves must be kneaded very thin and dried into hard crusts so they will not mold.

And this is the hard crust which he can eat at last. This is the reward which he, driven to exhaustion in its pursuit, has finally achieved. This is why he attacks it with such fury, as if to avenge all his suffering.

But now he is very quiet. He has eaten half the bread and folds the other half into his bundle for safekeeping for another time; he handles the bread as if it is a cherished possession, and his face is peaceful; in his eyes there is a gentle glow. He gathers the crumbs which have fallen on his knees, carefully places everything back into his knapsack and sighs, sighs with relief.

I cannot resist speaking with him, I move and sit beside him and ask where he is going. I learn that he is on his way to the provincial prison to discharge with bread and water the delinquent taxes he owes to the Crown.

PAUL MARGUERITTE

Pierrot, Murderer Of His Wife

Translated with an Afterword by Robert Storey

CHARACTERS:

Pierrot
An Undertaker

From a white, low-necked, pleated blouse, with large buttons, a head and hands emerge, as white as plaster. The head: conspicuous for the eyes and lips, the former black, the latter red: thus is sharpened the gaze of the right eye—the other is closed—and the laugh wrinkling a single corner of the mouth. The forehead: enlarged by a white skullcap, hemmed in by a second (traditional) in black velvet. The bands: also plaster-white; and the wrists are encased in tight cuffs beneath the ample and floating sleeves. Large trousers: the pantlegs clear the top of the instep and the gold-buckled shoes.

(N.B.—Pierrot seems to speak?—Pure fiction.—Pierrot is mute, and this play, from one end to the other . . . is mimed.)

CURTAIN UP

The room with its somber old oak wainscots is dark; here a cupboard, there a set of shelves, their backs to the wall; a chair at the right, a table at the left, broken-necked bottles on the floor. Drawing and holding the eye, there, at the rear of the stage: a portrait of Columbine, a bed. Bed and portrait detach themselves from the shadows in astonishing relief and give, despite their inertness, the impression of life. In her gold frame, Columbine, fleshy, with naked breasts, is laughing throatily—alive; there

From Paul Margueritte, ed., *Nos Tréteaux: Charades de Victor Margueritte; pantomimes de Paul Margueritte* (Paris, 1910). Music by Paul Vidal.

are such portraits in Hoffmann. The bed itself disquiets by the folds of its reddish curtains, drawn like those in catafalques. MUSIC, soft and bizarre—the tuneful harmony of such an interior: the laughter of Columbine, the respiration of the red bed weave through it. A moment elapses. A door gently opens. The bloated, pink face of an undertaker, sweaty and blood-tinged, appears behind it. He drags in Pierrot: tall, supple, draped in white—classical, in short. He staggers and plunges into the emptiness; each step is a genuflection: he has legs of rubber; his arms, like wings, hang down neglected. His weakness is equivocal: is it drunkenness? dejection? Both men arrive in this way, the fat living figure and the spectral, both with measured steps—the black, the white.

Pierrot

—Whew!

He staggers, folds up, throws a leg over a chair, collapses into it, in a dead faint. The undertaker slaps his hands; Pierrot comes to.

—Ah! there! see! Columbine, she's smiling . . . how gracious . . .

His arm indicates the portrait.

—What eyes, what a dainty nose! what a mouth . . . Alas! dead. And here we've just come from out there, where we've put her in the ground. You remember: the pickaxe, the spade, the great hole, the earth thrown in . . .

The undertaker, standing opposite Pierrot, mimes, like his companion, the funeral scene.

—And the prayers and the sobs. Dead! Dead! Ah! I'll never be able to console myself.

He weeps.

—Never!

He falls back in a swoon, revealing the distressing silhouette of his body, bent over the chair in a sharp angle, arms and legs rigid.

—Come now! you must accept the inevitable! says the undertaker, who sympathetically dries Pierrot's eyes. The stench of his handkerchief has the effect of smelling salts; Pierrot becomes indignant, sneezes, throws the rag in the man's face: he nonetheless presses the undertaker's hand.

—At last! It's true, I have to resign myself, be a man . . . Ah! . . . At last! Let's huck ourselves up a bit. A little glass of cognac, what do you say?

The undertaker nods assent; Pierrot goes to the sideboard to fill two small glasses. Your health! says the undertaker.

—Oh no! Yours! The health of the deceased!

Both toast the portrait.

—Well well! it's odd, not bad, rather good, this cognac!

Pierrot, the decanter still in his hand, smacking his lips, pours himself one little shot after another.

—Nice . . . very nice . . . delicious . . . oh devilishly delicious . . .

The undertaker, enticed, glass vainly extended, dares to tug Pierrot by the sleeve. Pierrot explodes with indignation.

—Hunh? What's that supposed to mean? A second glass, you dare to . . . of my cognac? (my *delicious* cognac!) . . . Drunkard! insulting the dead, and in this room, you miserable . . . Get out! Get out! Immediately!

The undertaker, who doesn't yield fast enough to Pierrot's claims, is beaten and driven out shamefully by kicks in the ass. Pierrot bursts into long, convulsive laughter. Then, calmer, he opens his mouth, prepares to make a great confession. Uneasy, he stops himself.

But the thought that obsesses him slowly ravages his face. Impressions of fear, of anger, of sadness, of astonishment. The secret, a second time, comes to his lips. He slaps his hand over his mouth! and, slyly, shifts his ground.

—I'm sleepy. Tired. Let's go beddy-bye. Take off our clothes: first the shoes . . .

He sits down, takes his foot in his hand.

—Hunh?

Quickly and fearfully he turns around.

—Beg pardon? No? . . . ah . . . ah . . . idiot, there's nothing there.

Shrugs, takes his other foot.

—Ah hah! now this time . . .

Stands up, looks under the chair, under the table, under the bed; he opens the bedcurtains and recoils, full of fright, before the empty bed.

—I remember!

He contemplates the portrait fixedly, points a trembling finger at it.

—I remember . . . Close the curtains! I don't dare . . .

He backs up and, with his hands behind him, blindly draws the curtains. His lips tremble, and then an invisible force tears from Pierrot the secret risen to his mouth. The MUSIC listens.

—Here it is:

—Columbine, my dear, my wife, the Columbine of the portrait, was sleeping. She was sleeping, there, in the great bed. I killed her. Why?

... Ah, now that's the question. She stole my money, drank my wine, beat my back, beat it hard; and as for my head . . . she furnished it with a little bit of hardware. Cuckoo, yes, that's what she made me, and went about it to extreme lengths. But what does that matter? I killed her—because I wanted to, what other reason is there? To kill her, yes . . . just the idea of it delights me. But how to do it?

For Pierrot, like a sleepwalker, is reenacting his crime; and in his hallucination, the past becomes the present.

—There's surely the rope? Give it a twist—squack!—it's done. Yes, but the tongue hanging out, the frightful-looking face? No. —A knife? or a saber, a huge saber? Zlip! through the heart . . . yes, but the blood running out, in torrents, streaming down. —Hunh! damn! . . . Poison? a little phial of just . . . nothing at all, tossed off, and then . . . yes! and then the stomach cramps, the suffering, the torments, agh! it's horrible (obvious too). You could always use a gun: poom! but poom! somebody'd hear it. Nothing. I can't find anything.

He walks up and down, in grave meditation. Then trips accidentally.

—Ooooooh! that hurts!

Rubbing his foot.

—Hoo! that hurts! It'll be okay, it's better already.

Keeps rubbing; and his foot starts to tickle.

—Ha! Ha! That tickles! Ha! ha! No! it makes me laugh! Ha!

He quickly lets go his foot, strikes his forehead.

—I've got it!

Cunningly:

—I've got it. I'll tickle my wife to *death*, that's it! Tickle her very obligingly, yes! A very nice idea. Ah! yes, hut quietly . . . gently . . . let's see . . .

With the stealth of a fox he approaches the red bed and listens.

—She's sleeping, good!

He opens the curtains halfway, looks in.

—Sleeping soundly—get ready!

He draws the curtains on their rod, but instead of sliding quietly, the rings make a grating noise: he trembles.

—Mnn! it's a serious job: gently, gent . . .

The rings grate horribly.

—Ah, damn it to hell!

Violently, risking all, he throws open the curtains with a single yank and, bent over, at the head of the empty bed, he takes a look.

—Nothing. Hasn't stirred. Still sleeping. Here, love, here's a kiss. Tee hee. She's so pretty, asleep: a tiny face, with sweet little eyes, a nose as big as a pin, gently sagging breasts, a backside that shows clearly . . .

Having abandoned himself for a moment to a retrospective lust, Pierrot pulls himself together.

—Let's get to it! First the ropes.

Ties Columbine up tightly with an imaginary cord.

—So you can't budge, legs or arms. —Next, a gag.

Cags her with an imaginary handkerchief.

—And now . . .

Lifts up the sheet, slips his hands under the covers: they begin to fly.

—To work. —Laugh, give me a smile; good morning, Columbine.

He throws himself full length upon the bed and, undergoing a transformation, stretches out, rigid: he shakes his tickled feet frantically; he works his mouth free of the cloth; he becomes—he is—Columbine.

She wakes up.

—It's you, Pierrot, oh ah ha ha! you're tickling me, oh ah ho ho! stop! oh! stop! hee ha ha! I'm going to break the ropes, oh! oh! oh! you're hurting me! . . . ah! ah! you're hurting me! . . .

Pierrot jumps out at the foot of the bed and tickles: without speaking, without laughing, his face a crucifixion. Suddenly, he stops.

—I heard . . .

Steps forward, brings one hand to his ear, the other to his heart.

—What is it! My heart. Beating hard! Very *hard*! Very *HARD*!

And his hand testifies to a growing throbbing, and his eye in its socket gleams haggard, terrified.

—Growing quieter now. Beating . . . more quietly! Quietly! Steadily. There. Nothing.

His hands fall to his side.

—Cot off with just a fright. And now we'll tickle: it's you, Columbine, who'll pay for that!

And he tickles insanely, he tickles madly, he tickles relentlessly. He throws himself on Columbine's bed.

She writhes with horrible gaiety. One of her arms comes free and helps free the other, and these two dementedly imprecate Pierrot with curses. She bursts out with genuine, strident, fateful laughter; rises halfway up; tries to throw herself from the bed; and the tickled, tortured, epileptic feet keep dancing. It is a death-struggle. She rises up once or twice more—a final spasm!—opens her mouth for a last malediction, and

falls back; draped over the hed; head and arms dangling down.

Pierrot becomes Pierrot. Scratching still at the foot of the bed, exhausted, panting, but victorious. He is stunned.

—So! No more. She doesn't move. Is she . . . ! Dead. Yes, but is she completely done for? Let's take a look: the heart? No heat. The pulse? Not a flutter. The eyes? Turned in. The tongue? Sticking out. Dead! It's finished. Let's arrange things properly now. The head first, on the pillow we'll just take care of the expression . . .

Under Pierrot's sacrilegious fingers, the dead woman's face becomes, little by little, calm and smiling.

— . . . take off the ropes . . . just straighten the bed . . . smooth out the wrinkles, and . . . it's done, nothing else, they'll be completely fooled. Columbine's sleeping just as she was a moment ago, quite peaceful. There! n-no no, it's finished.

He closes the curtains, turns around. Winking one eye, given over to a sense of pure joy, a pale smile on his lunar face, he rubs his hands together, for a good long time.

—Dead! *quite* dead, and nobody'll see a thing, not one thing! The policeman, with his big saher and moustache, he comes knocking on my door, bam! ham! I go to open up. Crabs me by the collar. Me? Oh Mr. Policeman, look for yourself: there she is, dead in her bed, quite prettily: I wash my hands of it, you know. And prison, handcuffs, bolts—not for me, not any more: dead in her hed, nothing of the kind. And the guillotine, wham! the slam of the blade, my head rolling off . . . ah! not for me, ha ha ha.

And Pierrot laughs a long silent laugh. A torpor comes over him, immobilizing, blood-congealing; his eyes close, his head falls to his chest even as the contented smile curls the plaster-white lips. MUSIC. He starts, looks around him, stretches.

—Ooof! I'm tired, all done in . . . Certainly got a right to sleep now. Yawns.

—Beddy-bye. Beddy bye-hye.

Lullaby MUSIC.

—Let's take off our clothes.

Sits down.

—Shoes . . .

But when, as before, he starts to pull off his shoes, he watches with stupor, then fright, his foot shaken by an involuntary dance, an alcoholic

trepidation. The trembling spreads, takes hold of the other foot, the other leg.

Pierrot stands up, shaking all over. Not a doubt about it now. The tickling of Columbine, like a contagious and vengeful disease, has seized him.

Pierrot runs through the room, on tiptoe, in every direction. His arms, huge, like wings, beat the air madly and tragically.

—Stop, oh for pity's sake, stop, my feet . . .

The shaking stops. Pierrot falls back upon the soles of his feet and gravely comes to a decision.

—What can I do? ah! drink! that's the remedy, that's what I'll do. And he mimes, grandly.

—Yes, one shot, two, cheers! drink it off, and another one! until you're rolling on the floor, eyeless, brainless, drunken, dead . . . Oh no! puh! I don't want that.

But the MUSIC breaks out, and again the cruel trembling shakes the crazed Pierrot's feet; his teeth start to chatter.

—No! no more! no more!

Throwing himself to his knees before the smiling, implacable portrait:

—Columbine, have mercy, have pity, forgive me. I'd rather drink, I'm going to drink!

He goes up to the table, sets the bottles upon it. Then, with the grandeur of an antique gesture, invokes the sovereign blessing of drunkenness.

—Flagons, full of exquisite wine, I shall drain you; send me to sleep, grant me drunkenness, dream, extinction, he compassionate, flagons I implore, I kiss . . .

He drinks. MUSIC, sluggish, muffled. He drinks in long gulps.

—One!

Throws the bottle, empty, over his shoulder.

—Horrible wine.

Even drunkenness is refused Pierrot; the wine nauseates him.

—Drink up!

Takes a second bottle—champagne.

—Yes, this'll be better.

But the wine he has drunk has begun to take effect; Pierrot's eye glitters, his face glows; the MUSIC becomes lively. He has cut the wire filament, is about to pop the cork; he stops in time.

—Wait! Patience! Guzzle it down in one gulp? oh no, let's sip it.

He regards the bottle with tenderness, cries out:

—I'll drink it five times, I'll take possession of it five times. First with my eyes.

Looks at it, admires it.

—What a pretty color. —With my hands: I want to caress it like the hand of a woman.

Caresses it.

How gentle it is. —My ear. Listen.

Sits down, brings the bottle to his ear, then, overcome and enraptured, places it between his legs.

—Yes, she speaks, she sings.

The MUSIC strays about.

—Songs of the violin, songs of the flute, songs of the piano. —Now the nose's turn.

Still sitting, he sniffs the bottle: the bouquet attracts him intoxicatingly: the bottle dances in his hand and touches off a spasm that lasciviously excites his arms, head, legs, then is cut off by a swoon.

—Finally, the tongue: drink up!

And Pierrot pops the cork, licks up the overflowing foam; drinks voluptuously.

—Oh that's good. It's going down, deep into my veins . . . spreading out . . . mounting to my head . . . warming me up . . . making me gay! Your health, Columbine!

An ironical toast to the portrait, then a lecherous glance at the bed.

—Ah! Ah! here . . . Columbine . . . I kiss you, I take you in my arms, I . . .

Pierrot becomes morose. The sparkling drunkenness of the champagne is already wearing off.

—Cold. It's gloomy in here, sad . . .

Night falls; the MUSIC becomes somber.

—Mbrr!

Goes to break the neck of the last bottle on the edge of the table.

—Drink up; that's the end of it.

Drinks; standing up tall; then collapses in a heap on the chair.

The night is complete.

In the half-darkness, a vague, white Pierrot. He gets up slowly, a candle in his hand, crosses the room, hesitatingly, with thoughtless movements. Begins to undress himself at last, to lie down, to take

possession of his bed: when an excess of terror nails him to the spot. It is Remorse, involuntary and all-powerful, now haunting Pierrot. He thinks he sees—he does see—that the bed, lost in the shadows, is taking on life, glowing like an enormous lantern, alive. The tenebrous curtains grow crimson, little by little they shimmer, flare up.

Pierrot passes his hand over his forehead, changes the candle's position. Nothing now.

The bed, once more, is sunk in darkness. But now, producing new and greater anxiety, the portrait comes alive. At first the frame glows phosphorescent, then Columbine lights up: her laughter rings out from red lips and white teeth. She lives; and she is laughing at Pierrot . . . Before the portrait he recoils mechanically, on stiff legs.

He stops. He grows indignant with himself. He exhorts himself to be brave. He will be brave. He moves forward, arms extended. He glides, spectral, already dead, to meet the dead. He touches her.

The MUSIC, at the shattering signal of a gong, goes insane. Pierrot's teeth chatter, his hand unconsciously catches hold of the bed; the flame sets it alight. The bed suddenly flares up, glows crimson anew.

Pierrot, in the ruddy light, contorts his body, the prey of madness. He turns upon himself three times, flails his arms about, fingers clawing at the emptiness.

It is the old trepidation, the horrible tickling, that frenetically shakes his body; and in the last funereal sob from his throat, there is the old laughter: of Columbine's death-throes . . . Suddenly, at the feet of his painted victim, who laughs in ecstatic triumph, Pierrot falls backward in one great motion, arms extended in a white crucifixion; and his body drops to the floor.

CURTAIN

ROBERT STOREY

Afterword

Les amis de Pierrot were rife in nineteenth-century France. The extraordinary talents of Baptiste Deburau ("the most perfect actor who ever lived," according to Théophile Gautier) had revived an enthusiasm for the white-faced clown shortly after the first quarter of the century; Gautier's no less extraordinary review of *Marrchand d'habits* (1842), a macabre little pantomime, had ushered him straightway into the literary imagination. Although the mime's latest biographer, M. Tristan Rémy, contends that Deburau never appeared in the piece, its Pierrot having been animated by the actor Paul Legrand, there can be little doubt that both this pantomime and Baptiste often converged in the fancy of his great romantic admirers to create the Pierrot of Bandelaire's conception: "pale as the moon, mysterious as silence, supple and mute as the serpent, lean and long as a gibbet."

The type is familiar—the Pierrot of sickly moonlight and slightly sinister gaiety, that Pierrot who makes an appearance in later years in the poetry of Laforgue, his neck thrust from between pinched shoulders like a stalk of "hydrocephalic asparagus," or, in Verlaine's youthful sonnet, clawing at the emptiness of cold interstellar space. But Pierrot inquiet (and inquiétant) was only one of the clown's many guises. For the sanguine Théodore de Banville, Pierrot was always a simple and good-hearted child of *le peuple*, "tour à tour joyeux, triste, malade, bien portant, battant, battu, musicien, poète, niais, toujours pauvre, comme est le peuple [by turns merry, sad, sickly, robust, eudged, a musician, a poet, a fool, always poor, like the people]"—as the influential critic Jules Janin described Deburau himself. When Gautier tried his own hand at a *pierrotade* (*Pierrot posthume*, 1847), he characteristically invested the clown with the engaging bêtise and naïveté of the valet of the old Italian comedy. And when Champfleury wrote his third pantomime for the Théâtre des Funambules, fired by the praises that Gautier and Nerval had lavished upon his first two derivative productions, he conceived—as one would expect of the future champion of *réalisme*—the first Pierrot *réaliste*. In *Pierrot Marquis* (1847), as Gautier playfully observed, "M. Champfleury gives to the allegorical whiteness of Pierrot a wholly physical cause: it is the flour from a mill that is sprinkled over the face and clothes of this pale and melancholy personage. One could not find a more plausible means of giving probability to this white phantom."

Champfleury's self-conscious theatrical experiments inspired no sequels in the decades immediately following; and while Pierrot put in sporadic, though noteworthy, appearances in poems, comtes, and spoken plays up to the 1880s, the pantomime that had won him such early sympathy from the literary public gradually fell into neglect. Baptiste Deburau's death came in 1846, and his pantomimic tradition—and success—were sustained for several years by his son Jean-Charles and by Paul Legrand. But after 1860 Charles usually played the provinces, leaving Legrand to attract the Parisian audience—an audience that now numbered few literati among its members. Predictably, when the reawakening of interest did come, just at the onset of *la décadence*, it was sparked not by the popular stage, but apparently by the "timid essays" of an ultraromantic, intoxicated by the "unbridled passions" of Musset and Byron, a young man "who wanted too much to live a magnificent novel to be able to write it"—Paul Margueritte (1860-1918).

Fascinated by Pierrot inquiet and by the pantomimic interpreters that people the recollections of his Uncle Mallarmé, Margueritte penned and produced his first pantomime, *Pierrot assassin de sa femme*, at the age of twenty-one, assigning himself the title role. It is an impressive little piece, as remarkable for its dramatic ingenuity as for the impetus it gave to the revival of this minor but demanding art. *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* actually received its first production at a small, makeshift theatre in Valvins, in 1881, and was published a year later. "It goes without saying that this thin little book remained almost unknown," wrote Margueritte in *Le Printemps tourmenté*: "but I sent it to several writers. It made explicit, as early as 1882, what I hoped to draw from this moribund art, at a moment when, if anyone had hopes for it, no one thought that it could truly be revived." Mallarmé, who had served as commemorative poet and *metteur en scène* for the Théâtre de Valvins (his daughter had served as its Columbine), later devoted a couple of paragraphs to Margueritte's "little book," explicating it with what R. M. Adams calls "his customary incisiveness and evasion." His analysis has been preserved in the collected works as *Minique*, part of *Cravonné au Théâtre*, from which I quote a fragment:

The stage illustrates not a real action, but an idea, in a vicious but sacred marriage (from which proceeds the Dream) between desire and accomplishment, the perpetration and its memory: now moving forward in anticipation, now moving backward in recollection, into the future, into the past, under an illusory appearance of the present. So operates the Mime, whose acting is confined to a perpetual allusion without shattering the glass; thus he creates an environment of pure fiction. Whoever reads the role, less than a thousand lines long, understands its laws immediately, as if placed before a stage, their humble repository. Amazement—accompanying the artifice of a notation of sentiments by means of unproffered sentences—that, perhaps for once with authenticity, there still reigns, between the pages and the gaze, a silence—the necessary condition and delight of reading.